

Colors of War

Pat Capps Mehaffey

We walked the drab halls to green-walled classrooms in the red brick high school building. In the study hall, one wall of windows offered yellow sunshine filled with dancing beige dust motes. Framed faded prints of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln furnished our art education.

Washington, with his crowded mouth of false teeth and his powdered hair clubbed into a ponytail, offered little inspiration. Lincoln appeared equally depressing in his black suit, with sad eyes and lines of affliction carved into his face. We viewed these paintings every morning during assembly in the auditorium.

The burgundy draperies with golden fringe opened to reveal the Stars and Stripes swaying from a gilt pole on the stage. With hands over hearts, we recited the solemn words of the Pledge of Allegiance and sang the soaring notes of “The Star Spangled Banner.”

On the first floor, near the front door, crouched the sinister offices of the principal and the superintendent. Lined with ancient brown paneling, these offices personified fear and despair. On one wall of the principal’s office, suspended on a nail from a short leather strap, hung a pale pine paddle. Two feet long and an inch thick, it had a row of holes drilled in one end. Boys whose skin displayed fiery red welts from whippings with this paddle starred as heroes.

For serious crimes such as skipping school or failing grades, a student, accompanied by his parents, could be summoned to the superintendent's office. Only the picture of a smiling Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the pastel fabrics of the shirtwaist dresses worn by the school secretary lit up this room.

Not one teacher under the age of fifty presided in our classes. The Selective Service drafted the young men, and the young women learned they could earn more money and help their husbands and sweethearts win the war by working in defense plants. They preferred serving as Rosie the Riveter to being stuck in a classroom. Now, grandmothers who appeared cut from the same pattern taught every subject. Each had steel-gray hair arranged in tight marcelled waves or screwed into a bun at the nape of the neck. They wore sensible big-heeled shoes that announced their approach, and ugly tan cotton hose. Nylon hose, obtainable only through the black market, had no place in our lives. The resolute replacement teachers stood before the blackboards writing wisdom with white chalk to a group of bored, disinterested teenagers.

One room on the second floor presented some sparkle – the chemistry lab. Here the glass test tubes and petri dishes, reflecting the glow of the overhead bulb, and the hot blue flames from the Bunsen burners brightened our days.

World War II cast its gray pall of anxiety and worry over every aspect of life. The homes of many classmates displayed the Mother's Gold Star in its red, white and blue frame in front room windows. The war took the lives of several hometown boys – some only four years older than I was.

By collecting green ration stamps for shoes, families bought school shoes for each child by order of age. Due to strict rationing of gasoline, we all walked everywhere we could, and shoes wore out early.

My mother said, “When you get off the school bus every day, tie the strings of your shoes together and loop them over your neck. By walking home barefoot, you can save shoe leather.”

No longer did the high school marching band, resplendent in crimson and black uniforms and carrying gleaming musical instruments, perform on the clipped green grass at football game halftimes. Suspended for the war’s duration were all athletic competitions. Since tires played a vital part in the wartime effort, rigid rationing applied to those for civilian use. Without extra tires, the yellow school buses could not transport teams from town to town. Retired teachers drove the buses for pickup and delivery of children in rural areas and applied recycled patches to punctured inner tubes and tires.

Mr. Lee, the principal, substituted as our typing teacher until a replacement was found. He surprised us one day by escorting a young war bride into the room, saying, “Students, meet Mrs. Lambert, your new teacher. Please make her welcome. Her brave husband is serving in the Marine Corps in the Pacific Theatre, and she’s living here with her mother until he comes home.”

Into our dreary existence Mr. Lee had delivered a beautiful miracle. With quickened interest, we absorbed the look of her long brown hair, her snapping dark eyes, and her wide white smile. She wore an orange (of all colors) twin sweater set with a rust tweed skirt and a strand of milky pearls at her throat. She had turned-down ankle socks with write-and-brown saddle shoes – just like every girl in the room. We almost swooned with pleasure. Anxious to please her and bring out her radiant smile, we learned to type with speed and talent. That was October 1944.

In February 1945, as we sat before our Royal manual typewriters pounding with efficiency, the preacher from the Baptist church knocked on the door and came in. Right behind

him stood Mrs. Lambert's mother, wearing a ghastly paleness and wringing her hands. They took Mrs. Lambert into the hall and closed the door. That didn't keep out the purple bruising sounds, however. We heard Mrs. Lambert screaming and sobbing. "No, No! Not Mark! I cannot live if Mark is dead. He can't be dead."

But he was. Totally and irrevocably dead – one of the 6,825 U. S. Marines killed in the battle for Iwo Jima. As the first troops landed on the island, they instantly learned the volcanic ash of the beaches afforded no cover from enemy fire. With no trees, no grass, no boulders, they were exposed. The Japanese didn't fire at once, however, but allowed the fighters to move closer to the entrenched artillery. At a covert signal, the red blood of American Marines flowed out onto the black mounds of crushed lava. Rows upon rows of the best of America's young men were mowed down by machine gun fire. Mark Lambert fell among them. His wife, our beloved teacher, would never see him again. How could she bear it? How could we?

Mr. Lee returned as our typing instructor. Every day, we looked at his thick, black-rimmed glasses and his black bow tie, at his white hair receding from his shiny pink forehead. His colorless voice droned in the room and disturbed the sandy dust motes. We faced a bleak, desolate landscape and yearned to see an orange sweater set and milky pearls.

His Face Kaleidoscoped

Yvonne Pearson

At Omaha Beach he swam with
one hundred pounds on his
twisted back to a body-
littered beach. Bombs
clotted the moon, spilled
its colors through the sky.
Medic by moonlight, socks
rotted on his feet.
His wound – the shaking hands.
And so I'm not a surgeon,
he explains to us again.

When wood fires warmed October,
he'd come around the kitchen door,
bouquets of mallards gathered
in his hands. He'd laugh and tell
us hunting stories, promised
he'd always be our fire.

The wound was already there,
his father's moon gone first,
his father the immigrant who cried
to talk of treeless winters on the
plain. They held in common that hole

my father filled with hunting rifles,
Valium, polished cars, us.

He courted me with apple blossoms
and in his emptiness he ate my heart.
So how do I warm myself now? His face,
kaleidoscoped, stares past me.
When the coyotes howl, when
the loon's cry sails the lake,
I wait for him to say
this is yours.

Saturday Nights

Helga Kidder

As dusk strolled down the lane,
Mother gathered us girls like produce
to scrub in a zinc tub. Father swept
the day away in front of our house.
After supper Mother tucked us between
fields of cut hay. Father
fastened the shutters
and closed the bedroom door.

I held my favorite doll like an apple.

Star Gazers

Craig S. Monroe

“Crap, what bunk. I can’t believe we paid good money for that. You coming into money, what a laugh.” Rick’s arms flailed in the air, his leather jacket reflecting the nightlights of the carnival midway. “Don’t see how that’s going to happen. You don’t even know anyone with money.” Rick walked on, scuffing his boots, kicking loose dirt into the air, spreading dark soot over brightly colored autumn leaves. Sam’s smaller size caused him to push harder to keep up with Rick’s long stride. Sam was still in high school, but he and Rick were best friends, back to elementary grades. Sam had attended Rick’s graduation and in September came to his nineteenth birthday party.

“Money?” Sam paused. “It could happen.” His head bent forward, looking at the ground. “You know, things happen sometimes.”

“Come on, Sam, get real,” Rick said. “Look at me, I still don’t have a job. Things like that don’t happen to guys like us. That old gypsy can’t see things in the stars.”

“Still, maybe...” Sam’s voice disappeared into the cold wind that blew his collar across his face.

A calliope sprayed its happy tune into the air, carneys called their promised treasures through loud speakers. The smell of sausage, onions and cotton candy mingled in the air like a strange soup that alternately beckoned and violated the nose.

Kids and adults played games and showed off to their sweethearts. “Everyone’s a winner,” the barkers yelled.

Rick kicked at an island of weeds in his path and grumbled.

“What’s the matter with you?” Sam said. “You been on edge all night. What was your fortune anyway?”

“Mine...mine makes no sense,” Rick said. “She said I could expect an ‘auspicious event, possibly leading to renewal,’ or something.”

“Or something?” Sam said. “What was the something?”

Rick stopped.

“Death, damn it...death.” It came from deep in his throat like a muffled cry. Rick turned to Sam, his eyes looking past him. “I got my induction notice this morning.”

“Oh, man...what did your Grandfather say?”

“I ain’t told him yet.”

“How come?”

“Don’t know what to say to him, that’s all.” Rick looked at the Ferris wheel spinning ahead of them. The colored lights whirled, the buckets with their fragile human cargo swayed like pendulums as each went over the top. A guy in one screamed; Rick’s gut shuddered and stiffened. “God, I don’t even know where Vietnam is. It scares the hell out of me, seeing all those body bags every night on TV.”

“Ya, I seen them, too,” Sam said. “What the hell are we doing there, anyway?”

Rick shook his head. “Killing commies, I guess.”

The Ferris wheel stopped and riders jumped to the platform, laughing.

“That sausage sure smells good,” Rick said. “You got any money, Sam?”

Sam thrust both hands into his pockets. “Not much,” he said. He opened his right hand, to expose a quarter and two nickels mixed in with some string and a toothpick. “Ha, so much for

coming into money,” Rick said. “Looks like I got a dollar though. Maybe we got enough for one.” A smile spread across Sam’s face.

At the side of the stand, there was a large oak tree with two picnic tables under it. Sam threw the sandwich down on one and Rick cut it with his pocketknife. Sam climbed on top of the table and sat down, his heavy boots on the seat. He took a bite and gazed at the ground, his eyes wandered as he chewed. His head lowered as if looking through his eyebrows, and then he jumped down and picked up something. “Rick, look.” He waved a \$100 bill under Rick’s nose.

Rick pulled his head back. “Where was it?”

“On the ground over there.” Sam pointed to a spot next to a plastic cup snagged on a root, dancing in the wind.

“Let me see it,” Rick said and reached with his hand.

“No way, you won’t give it back. I found it and it’s mine.” He turned and started walking down the midway, digging his heels into the dirt, the money in one hand, and the sandwich in the other.

Rick, still standing with his hand outstretched, watched his friend retreat. “All right, it’s yours. I didn’t mean...come on, wait up. Hey, the gypsy was right; you did come into money.”

Sam made no indication he heard Rick, and kept walking. After a few steps, he turned around and started walking backwards while looking at Rick. “I guess I did. Maybe the fifty cents paid off after all.

“I guess that means my fortune will come true? Damn!” Rick slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. “Why is this happening to me?”

“Don’t know,” Sam said. “Maybe you could go to Canada. Jim over in Union City did that. One day he gets a notice and the next day he’s gone. Folks get letters from him every now and then. He says he’s all right.”

“What would I do in Canada?”

“Same as you are doing here, not a hell of a lot of anything.” A small grin darted across Sam’s face, but Rick looked away.

“My Granddad wouldn’t be happy if I did that. He and my dad had their wars and came back alive.”

“There, you see,” Sam said crossing his arms in front of him, holding a rigid pose. “What more do you need?”

“Great,” Rick said. “Granddad has a hard time hearing cars coming and his knee causes him to wake up at night swearing. I don’t want that, or maybe worse. Mom says Dad wouldn’t talk about the war when he came home. She said he stayed with us just long enough to find the river of booze, and then followed it to its source she guessed. He never wrote, never said anything, just left. Doesn’t say much about war, does it. Sam, I’ve got to do something, but I don’t know what.” Rick reached down, picked up a stick, and rolled it in a sawing motion between the palms of his hands. “I had a bad dream last night.”

“Dream?”

“I marched up a winding road at night. Dark clouds blew across a crescent moon like a procession of waves. Someone behind me kept yelling, ‘Keep going; don’t stop or you’re dead.’ I could see where the road disappeared over the top of the hill. There was a crooked tree, with no leaves – tall against the sky. A hangman’s noose swayed from a long branch over the road. My legs hurt and I could hardly move – as if something held me back. The voice kept getting louder as if it would blow my ears apart. I turned and saw my Granddad looking down on me. ‘Keep going, don’t stop.’ I couldn’t figure what he meant. He reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. At that moment, I knew that he meant I’d be all right.” Rick pulled his arm back and threw the stick at a tree in front of him. The tiny stick bounced off the tree and fell in a pile of leaves. He picked up the stick and cradled it in his hand. “You know, you just want to run

away as fast as you can, but you know when you get where you're going, it'll be there waiting, – because it's in you."

"That's pretty creepy," Sam said.

"I can still feel the fear from that dream; I'm not sure what to do." Rick could see the stars through the trees. "Look Sam, Orion."

Sam looked up. "All I see is trees."

"There through that opening. Granddad's been showing me that since I was a kid. He said Orion stands guard defending us against the darkness beyond, his sword held high. Whenever I see it, I should remember that he protects us from the unknown that's out there in the dark. He says he believes what the government is telling us about Vietnam – the commies need to be stopped. I don't know as I care one way or the other, but I don't believe you should bury your head, either. I guess what is going on in Vietnam is wrong, isn't it?" Rick looked over at Sam, but Sam was digging a hole in the ground with the toe of his shoe. "Are you listening, Sam?"

"It won't be long and it's my turn," Sam said.

"Maybe the stars look different in Vietnam," Rick said. He walked to the tree and leaned against it, his eyes still on Orion.

"How would I know, I've never been there," Sam said, still digging.

Rick pushed himself away from the tree, forced back his shoulders, and took a deep breath. "I need to talk to Granddad."

Corners and Edges

Carol Bryan Cook

I've teetered on the edge
turned every corner
walked without direction
fallen off the ledge

found love that didn't last
trusted the wrong friend
stumbled around in a blur
run from a sorry past

survived, a bit broken, bent
for sure rounded my last corner
taken my last trip to the edge
never return to the hell I was sent

No One Calls

Ken Paxton

The old man's hands carefully brush aside the snow revealing a bronze headstone embedded in the frozen turf. Struggling, he twists free the thermos stopper, always screwed on tighter than need be, and pours hot water on an icy recess in the plaque's center. Steam rises and mingles with his own soft breath in the chill afternoon air. Around him snowscape and heavy sky merge into a misty curtain of driftwood grey.

The handle in the recess turns easily, for which he is grateful. He pulls out the vase stored upside down there and sets it upright back into its socket. Rotating firmly, he locks it securely into place, a little tighter than need be. A ceramic oval bonded to the vase still reveals her likeness. He'd chosen a rare smiling photo from the latter years, too small and faded now to catch the ambivalence in her eyes.

After pouring the remaining hot water into the vase, he sets in the roses. Their deep velvety scarlet soothes his tired eyes. It's been a week since Valentine's. Arranging them purposefully, almost sacramentally, he reaffirms his personal acceptance of the day.

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In another town hundreds of miles to the southeast, where snow is rare and rain common, a young mother helps her three-year-old daughter loosen the bow from her hair. She thinks of

another bow that needed untying years ago, belonging to another little girl very much like her own. She sees the troubled fingers that helped her then. Intensely maternal, this youngest daughter-mother knew not when or how such urges were born in her heart. They weren't of the early years. A tempest of the soul tore through their home when she as a child gave a child's love magnified through innocence. While elder siblings had love abounding in which to delight during the early years, she received nurture only from brief and uncertain latter years. She learned much more of love's fragile beauty, fretful eyes looking right through her, displaced but not unkindly.

Hoisting her daughter to the top bunk bed, she's distracted by a wall calendar. The February picture shows a fluffy grey kitten clutching a ball of indigo yarn. "February twenty-first," she whispers and checks her watch. "Still have time to call." Her daughter softly catches her face, gives a big kiss and merrily bounces all over the bed before plopping onto her pillow. More kisses, long, fervent, three-year-old prayers... she turns out the light and walks down the hall. Call to say what? "Hello, how are you?" To talk of children and vacations, weather and gardens. Were they not all longing to be together, yet thankful to remain apart and...unreminded?



To the northeast on a rocky coast the middle son-father tips his recliner back and gazes into the receding flames of his old stone fireplace, half asleep after dinner. Thoughtfully reminiscing, he strokes the aged golden lab sitting next to him like a wise old counselor. He brought home the puppy years before to teach his little sons the joy and responsibility of caring for other beings.

Most of the day he'd been a bit pensive. That morning when he rose early to pray and think things through, he noticed his

devotional book gave the date and lesson scripture as “February 21 - She hath wrought a good work on Me. (Mark 14:6)” Now he recalls warm coconut macaroons in winter, cool strawberry shortcake with the sweetest homemade whipped cream in summer, and wooden spoons wielded by a tender voice that never rose in anger in the early years. A voice that patiently soothed his first-grade fevers and miseries which seemed never to end.

The lab looks up at his master who fidgets in his chair, remembering another voice from the latter years: her profoundly forlorn, unsettled, and confused tones like a smooth flowing, beautiful river suddenly cast across a ragged jumble of broken bedrock. How those jagged boulders failed to rip him apart as he floated past, helpless in the current of her suffering, he knew full well. It was her own tender love while yet she could give it, developing in him an acquiescence more powerful than the chaos of those latter years. It was as well his father’s steadfast commitment. His isolated love, stripped to its barest essential, never wavered.

Those years ended unexpectedly. Shortly afterwards, Uncle Sam gave this son-father an offer he couldn’t refuse. He returned from Vietnam two years later to find his baby sister just starting high school. Before long he set out to discover a sparse corner of earth indifferent to his irrepressible memories. The din of coastal surf and seasonal storms provided a counterpoint expression of his desire to roar back at something larger than himself. Now faith and time, and his growing family, promote new roots and he is relieved no one calls on this day. “She has wrought a good work on me,” he thinks and regards it an unimaginable miracle.

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Brightly colored fabrics with a variety of textures portray an opaline creek curving across a grassy pasture and winding through emerald willows as it fades from sight. The eldest daughter-mother directs fabric through a whirring sewing machine. The peaceful scene depicts a favorite childhood picnic spot their family visited each summer near a snow-fed artesian creek that divided a broad meadow dotted with willow trees. As the last piece of the scene is appliquéd into place, she hears an older machine, not so quiet as her own, clacking evenly along cloths of delicate prints and hues guided by those steady hands of the early years.

Laying the finished quilt cover across her bed, she snaps a digital photo to document her achievement. The image in the LCD monitor is labeled at the bottom with the date and time: 02/21/04 06:05p.m. “Today,” she thinks, briefly startled. She hadn’t been close to home in the latter years, but before she left, the tempest came. Her adolescent estrangement prevailed over her youthful adoration and she resolved to go forth alone. She moved to the other side of the mountains to study accounting in a small college town. Not many years elapsed when she discovered love on her own terms, rekindling the joy that sprang from a merry childhood. Her recollections and images of the early years, most complete and least tended to, form a private place in her heart like a secret garden full of hidden joys, which she seldom visits. Often she recalls wearing clothes sewn by that gentle soul with gentle hands that brushed her auburn hair until it shone.

Setting the camera down and bending to pick up the cover, she wonders if her father maintains his annual rite of roses, given the degenerative arthritis in his knees. He never mentions it. For several years every February she went with him after she, her husband and children moved back to the hometown, before they settled out east.

On the bedroom radio Lucinda Williams sings, “See what you lost when you left this world, this sweet old world.” Vague reflections become keen regrets suddenly swirling up in her heart like sunken autumn leaves disturbed from the bottom of a quiet pond. The song continues, “Didn’t you think anyone loved you?” and she recalls other questions as much a bother to ignore as they are to...to what? You call, assuming a kindred frame of mind will answer, as interested in questions as you, but you’re not there to see the ache in their eyes. Who could be so presumptuous, so intrusive? No one calls.

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Clearing more snow off the rest of the headstone, the elderly husband-father stops to reflect on the inscription under her name. Quietly he recites, “Mother Sweet,” and remembers the joy they shared in the early years when it was a delight to call his bride by such a holy expression. A hollow breeze rises in the heavy evergreen boughs of solitary cedars stirring gently across the hillside like mourners. Further off in the overcast a lone goose marks its flight with muffled honking. “Come to Me all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28),” he reads from the plaque’s lower edge and adds, “Rest now.”

He screws the lid back onto the thermos, a little tighter than need be, and takes one last look at his bride’s picture. Forcing himself to rise from the snow against the sharp complaint of his knees, he shuffles back to the wrought iron gate and turns onto an empty sidewalk leading him home. The street lights turn on and chase back the twilight. He knows he’ll call one day soon when the sun is bright. When Canada geese fill the skies returning north to bear and raise their gangly, fuzzy offspring, he’ll call and talk about children and vacations, weather and gardens.

Note to an antiquary

Phil Gruis

If, on a far-off day,
you were to poke around
a cluttered junk shop,
musty with old sighs,
and come upon a camera
that once was mine
and buy the camera
and find in it a roll of film
brittle with age,
and process the film
and find on it
a single image,
that image would be
of her, at 18, living
safe from time,
her eyes still burning,
her lips about to speak
my name.

Back In The Basements

Marian Kaplun Shapiro

Dark. Damp. Most of all, Dangerous. These were the basements of Parkchester, where I grew up from 1939-1959. Girls were NEVER to descend into their depths lest the unsayable happen. I knew that to explore their labyrinthine corridors would be the absolutely scariest experience I could conjure up, one I couldn't share with anyone, even tell anyone. If my parents were to ever find out... Well, I wouldn't want to have to finish that sentence.

Starting at my building, 1480 Parkchester Road, these aisles of terror wandered from building to building, underground. If successful, I could get all the way to the "lower circle," approximately four blocks away. But success was not a foregone conclusion. At any point a connecting door might be locked. Even worse, an open door might slam shut, and then – entombment forever.

No one ever went down there, at least as far as I knew. Constructed as space for tenants to store such things as bicycles and baby carriages, the basements remained unused. Bats. Rats. Sounds in the dark (and in my imagination) followed me on my at-least-annual expedition. My heartbeat seemed louder than the old bell-jar clock on my parents' folded dining room table (without a dining room, it remained folded, its narrow top reduced to a shelf). My eyes, uncorrected at 20/800, dark-adapted as I made my way from shadow to shadow. Finally, the

light beckoned under the final door, and I emerged, triumphant with my secret. Safe for another year.

What made me do such a thing? Yes, I was a bit of a daredevil, skating backwards down “Dead Man’s Hill,” swinging upside down from the monkey bars, head dangling just above unforgiving concrete. (Imagine what parents would say to that playground design today!) I’d had my encounters with serious danger – for one, a narrow escape from a rapist in a Parkchester elevator. I’d learned all the rules of survival: Walk confidently as if you know where you’re going, even if you’re lost; ignore catcalls, etc. I did it all as if it were easy. But the fact was, I knew in my heart that I was a coward.

So my basement adventures were my self-designed boot camp exercises. I reasoned that if I could survive them, I could survive anything. Maybe forty years later, I remembered that learning. Driving alone in New Hampshire, a stranger to an unlit highway late at night, a pickup truck chased me, trying to force me off the road. With all my girl-in-basement energy I drove my old car at almost 90 mph, 20 mph faster than I’d ever driven in my life, chanting “Keep your eyes on the road, keep going, keep your eyes on the road...” until I had outrun him. I was grateful once again for my early self-training. The Bronx was with me once again, this time in New Hampshire.
